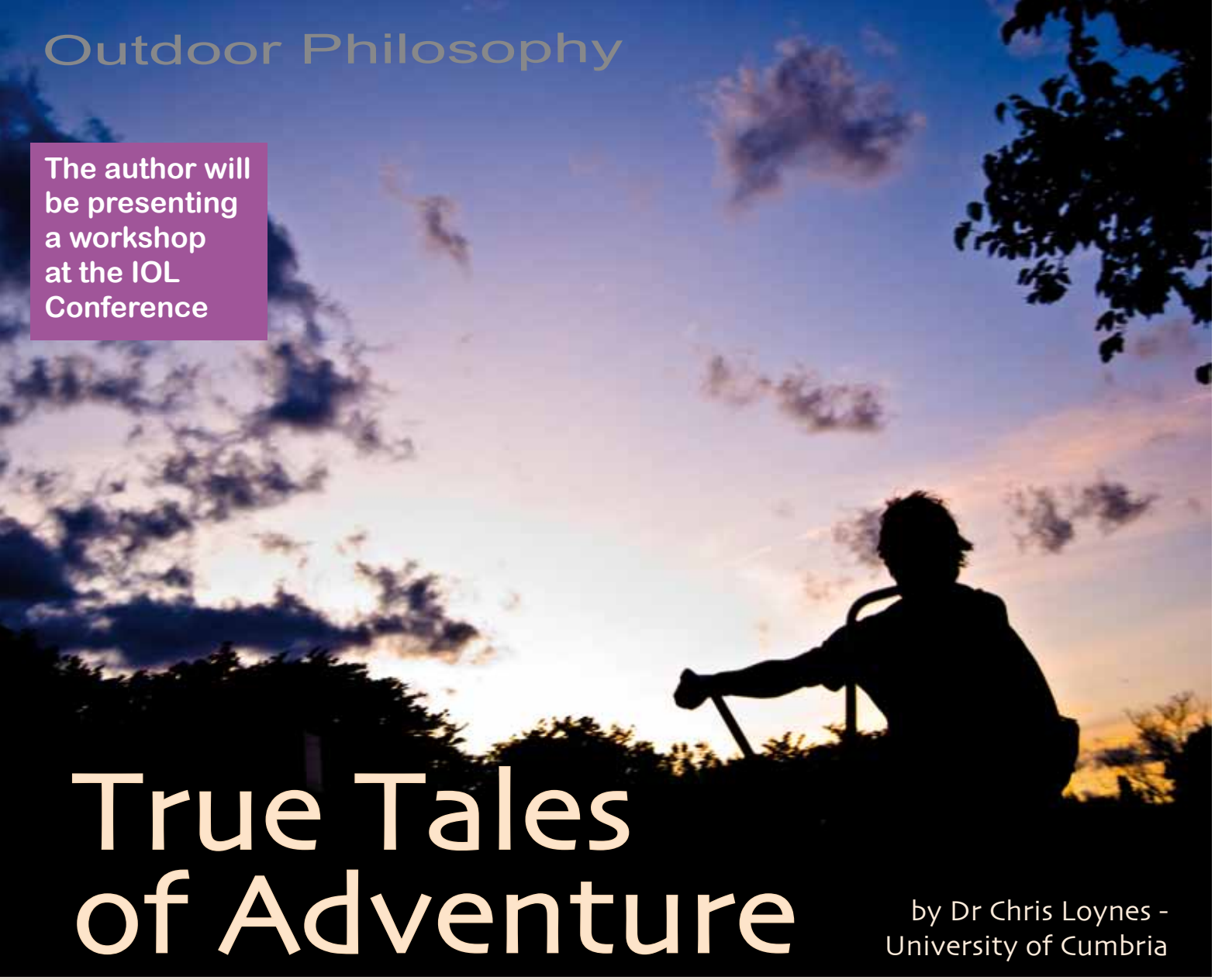
The author will be presenting a workshop at the IOL Conference



True Tales of Adventure

by Dr Chris Loynes - University of Cumbria

Recently, on the outdoor research discussion group, two people signing themselves off as 'grumpy old men' had 'a go' at Forest Schools. Their complaint boiled down to the fact that the traditional notion of adventure education was off the front pages of websites and magazines displaced by this upstart of Forest Schools 'whatever they were!' They bemoaned what they considered to be the death of 'proper' adventures. What it seems to me that these two have not noticed is that their kind of adventure is doing fine if not burgeoning with expeditions to far flung corners of the world, scouting and guiding and Duke of Edinburgh award trips, not to mention overflowing outdoor centres. They also seem to have forgotten what it is to be 5 years old, for this is the age group Forest Schools are aimed at, not as competition for teenage daring do. As I remember it my fifth year was full of climbing trees, riding bikes, exploring further and further afield, building dens and lighting fires. Ponies kicked us, nettles stung us; and bumps and bruises from falling out of those trees were soothed with Nivea® cream. All this sounds pretty adventurous to me.

In her article in the last Horizons (50) Elspeth Mason concludes that 'adventure' is what each of us make of it and cannot be defined by one set of words. Elspeth highlights her concern that this is not how the profession understands the word and that it may have institutionalised it - fencing it in to one, potentially unhelpful, way of thinking. She invites us to explore our own definitions and then to consider what this might teach us about adventures and educations. I would like to start this article by backing up her point of view and

then taking up her offer to reflect on my own idea of adventure before thinking about where this might lead me in my professional practice. Perhaps, in this way, the field can avoid the myopic rigidity of 'grumpy old men' and embrace, even seek out, new adventures.

There are many places to start with tales of adventure that are true for me. I learned my way around the Snowdonia and Lakeland mountains informally following others who knew the way. These early adventures led to my first informal opportunities to lead others on these same routes. I didn't work out the way from maps but from my memory of the stories that were told along the way, a mixture of tales from the past, from the leaders own 'epics', of natural and cultural history and climbers' myths. I could read a map and compass but rarely needed to. Later on, in the same mountains, staff from Plas y Brenin chatted about how they had transformed their rock climbing introductory courses. No longer did you spend three days on a climbing tower working out how to belay, place runners and abseil. Instead, you bouldered learning the skills of strength, flexibility and balance as you worked out moves and explored lines on the rock. Ropes came along as a sideshow later in the week. Their purpose was to make it safe to play higher up.

This hints at risk being secondary, something to manage in order to get to the central joy of the activity. I think Colin Mortlock wrote well about the nature of adventure in his book The Adventure Alternative. It's a shame that he reduced so much of the discussion about the educational benefits of adventure to the pedagogy of risk. I think it created a rather one-dimensional view that set the field up for trouble when risky activities led to the inevitable. The baby went out with the bathwater perhaps.

Ian Peter, when he was chair of the MLTB (as was), took the questioning of adventure as skill or technology one step further. He held out for calling mountaineering an activity and not a sport. For him it was not the equipment or the skills of performance. These were an end to all manner of – and here's the important piece – diverse adventures, i.e. what you made of the experiences you had in the places you were in and with the people you were with. This was a bold stand at the time because it cost the MLTB money from the Sports Council (they would not fund an 'activity"). Whatever you think of this approach it is constructive for my purposes as it suggests all manner of things adventure can be rather than banging on, as I have, about what it is not.

So, let me be constructive. For me, adventure is not the equipment or the skill. It is that move or line, the dance with the place I'm in and the people I'm with, a creative act of meaning making. It is the bike ride (some basic equipment helps!) onto the Somerset Levels with a warm front scurrying in over flooded levels and hearing the cry of whooper swans for the first time as they settle onto the water after a long flight south from the Arctic. It is finding my way through the muddy tracks back to the soaring scarp of the Mendip Hills to finish up with a swoop down the one in four bends of Cheddar Gorge. It is struggling into wetsuits on a Friday night to beat all the other cavers down Swildon's Hole, jumping in the waterfalls and pools, telling bad jokes about baked beans and farting, shouting, rushing to get steam free light on the stalagmites at the second drop. Sometimes exuberant, sometimes still; solo or social; curious for new horizons; full of wonder, exploring what was in the world and what my body could do; arguing about what it all meant. So, that is some of my 'adventure'.

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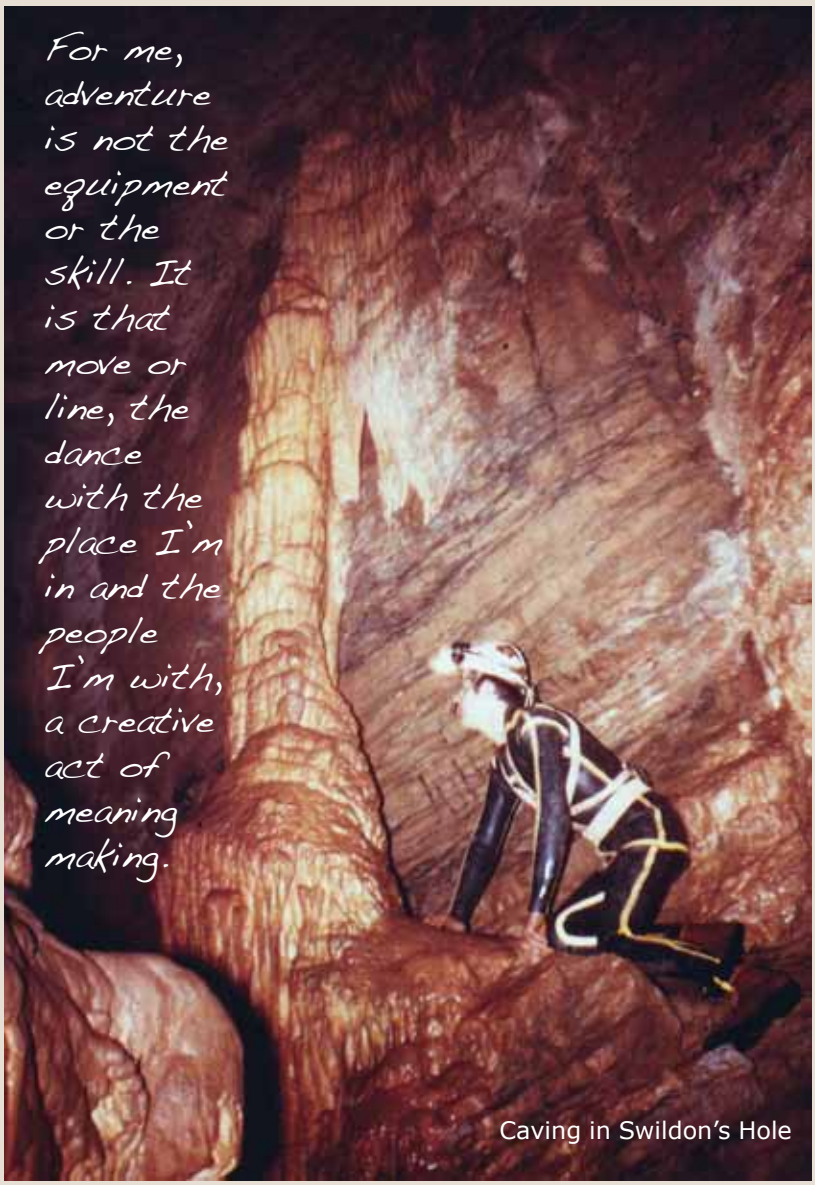

Caving in Swildon's Hole

The more I think about the value of these experiences for education, the more I think it is the stories the student tells, the stories the students tell each other and the stories I, as a leader, add to the mix that make the experience. They offer us the rich potential that we harvest for our educational work. You will gather that I do not think that it is enough to be 'student centred' and listen only to each individual story, although, in my view, this would be a big step forward in places where the 'story' of the day is dominated by the leader or defined by the symbols and rituals of the sport. Nor do I think it is enough to encourage the students to listen to the different stories of the day from each of them, learning to appreciate difference and negotiating important understandings to hold between them as their collective experience. Outdoor educators do not have to be quiet in this student centred world. I think that it is our moral imperative to provoke adventures helping young people to find out what life means, how to get along with each other and the world they are in. It is also our responsibility to pass on the 'crown jewels', the pearls of 'wisdom' we have learned and that we have steered by and then, when the time comes, to let them go to see what they will make of them. This all sounds like an excuse for a good campfire or sunset to me! Something that leaders of Forest Schools, grumpy old men and this author might agree on!

Perhaps this is why I have been drawn to outdoor development training in my career. 'Development', the realm of families, communities and informal education, is focused on the story of the experience and what it means in the life of the person. 'Education', to stereotype for the sake of making a point, the realm of schools, is focussed on knowledge and skills. While these may often be important tools with which to craft an adventure story, it is, for me, the narrative itself where the real potency of adventure education lies.

Even here I would invite caution. Theories of outdoor education offer the three strands of self, others and environment as fields of practice. Whilst you will hear of these in their formal settings of personal, social and environmental education; and in their informal settings of personal and social development, you do not hear of 'environmental development'. Recent theory questions this omission. It highlights the importance of the environment we grow up in for the healthy development of people and of our capacity to care for the environment in the early years of human development. It is not enough for our stories to appreciate the places we explore for their beauty or their challenges. I think it is time to build them into our stories as lived relationships in which the non-human characters of the plot matter as much as the human ones.

This leaves me with important questions for my practice.

1. Despite valuing a certain form of adventure, do I unwittingly offer other forms wrapped up in those symbols and rituals of technology, clothing, performance and location?

2. Despite recognising that adventure is diverse, do I unwittingly challenge the perspective of others without properly considering the educational worth of these approaches just because it is different from mine?

3. How do I work more with all the stories that emerge from our experiences without oppressing any one voice?

4. How do I give the environment a voice so that it becomes a character in the story that is included in the valuing and decision-making as the plot unfolds?

I wrote this piece as a prelude to a talk at the National IOL Conference in October 2010. Hopefully, I will then be able to offer some ideas in response to these four questions! I will be offering a workshop in which I plan to explore with others how we can work with stories of adventure, the 'true' stories of our students. ■

Author's Notes

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For more information on "Adventure in Outdoor Learning": the IOL National Conference October 15th-16th 2010 see: http://www.outdoor-learning.org/membership/iol_conferences.htm